DRAFT: Minors and Online Activity: An Interpretation of the *Library Bill of Rights*

The online environment offers opportunities for accessing, creating, and sharing information. The rights of minors to retrieve, interact with, and create information posted on the internet in schools and libraries are extensions of their First Amendment rights.

Schools and libraries should ensure that institutional environments offer opportunities for students to use social media and other online applications constructively in their academic and recreational pursuits. Students’ learning can be strengthened with the use of online applications, for example:

* allowing young people to create documents and share them online
* uploading pictures, videos, and visual material
* engaging in interactive games
* adding tags to online content to classify and organize information

Social media allows for the creation of online communities that can enhance social, interpersonal, and academic skills. These communities allow an open exchange of information in various formats.

Online tools may help children and young adults learn about and organize social, civic, recreational, and academic activities. Many sites invite users to establish online identities, join networks, share personal information, and create web content. Librarians curate age-appropriate resources for academic and personal pursuits and teach children and young adults how to be safe online. Parents and guardians play a critical role in preparing their children for participation in online activity by communicating their personal family values and by monitoring their children’s use of the internet. Although they may feel protective toward all children, parents and guardians are responsible for what only their children access online.

The use of social media and online resources poses two competing intellectual freedom issues: the protection of minors’ privacy and the right of free speech. Some have expressed concerns regarding what they perceive to be an increased vulnerability of young people in the online environment when they post personally identifiable information. In an effort to protect minors’ privacy and safety, adults sometimes restrict access to online activities. For example, filters are sometimes used to restrict access to social media, denying minors’ rights to free expression online. Prohibiting minors from using social media does not teach safe behavior and leaves youth without the necessary knowledge and skills to protect their privacy or engage in responsible speech. Instead of restricting or denying access, library workers, educators, administrators, parents, and guardians should educate minors to use online tools responsibly, ethically, and safely.

The First Amendment applies to online speech created by minors. Use of social media in a school or library allows minors to access and create resources that fulfill their interests and information needs, for social connection with peers, and for participation in a community of learners. Restricting expression and access to social media violates the tenets of the *Library Bill of Rights.* Instances of inappropriate use of such tools should be addressed as individual behavior issues, not as justification for restricting or banning access. Library workers, educators, and administrators have a responsibility to monitor threats to and advocate for the intellectual freedom of minors.

As defenders of intellectual freedom and the First Amendment, libraries have a responsibility to offer unrestricted access to online activity in accordance with local, state, and federal laws and to advocate for greater access where it is abridged. Library workers and educators should help young people learn digital citizenship skills and attitudes that prepare them to be responsible, effective, and productive communicators.

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